UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL
E/CN.4/2001/NGO/143
13 February 2001

Original: ENGLISH AND
FRENCH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-seventh session
Item 11(c) of the provisional agenda

CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement*/ submitted by Reporters without Borders-International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1 February 2001]

*/ This written statement is issued, unedited, as received in English and French from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Afghanistan

The Taliban and the media
A country with no news and pictures

Introduction
During the night of 26 September 1996, the Taliban militia entered the Afghan capital of Kabul and took control of the city. One of their first moves was to lock up the premises of national television and ban all TV broadcasts. Four years after they took power, the Taliban and their allies control more than 90% of the country. Their most recent military victories mean they are likely to gain permanent control of the valleys held by the opposition, particularly the Panjsher valley, currently held by Massud. Law and order reigns in Kabul. Afghanistan is now known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Sharia (Islamic law) has been brought into force. The Taliban have introduced radical reforms, particularly concerning the status of women. Press freedom, which was already threadbare under the Taliban's predecessors, has totally disappeared. All television broadcasts have stopped and the TV building is being used as a barracks. The sole radio station, which covers the whole country, puts out only religious programmes and official propaganda - even music has no place on the Taliban's airwaves. The printed press - no more than ten publications throughout Afghanistan - is under government control. Only foreign media, working with the help of dozens of Afghan journalists living in exile, are trying to supply impartial news to a population manipulated by the "theology students".

The Taliban have shown no qualms about murdering Afghan journalists who have fled to Pakistan. Many more have been threatened after writing reports criticising the Taliban's domination of that country. These relentless attacks on press freedom are underpinned by the religious precepts taught in the *madrasas*, Pakistan's Quranic schools. The danger that Pakistan, and particularly North-West Frontier Province, may also come under the Taliban's influence is increasing as Pakistani religious movements engage in a power struggle with the military government over cable television.

The press is sacrificed
The Taliban victory of 1996 marked the start of a complete takeover of the press: journalists fled the country by the dozen and new teams, made up of militiamen, "Pakistani advisers" and former journalists, were brought in to replace them. The Taliban arrested any journalists who had not managed to escape or go into hiding. **Khalil Rostaqi**, an intellectual and journalist with the newspaper *Mayan*, was arrested a week after the taking of Kabul and held for six months. Around the same time **Abdulhanan Rahimi**, a national television reporter, was arrested at his home. Accused of spying for General Massud and compiling *"reports hostile to the Taliban"*, he was kept in a cellar for five months with three other people. Before he was released, one of his captors warned him: *"If you're arrested a second time, you're as good as dead."*

One Afghan journalist who recently returned to Kabul was categorical: *"There are no journalists left in Afghanistan today. They are working as religious officials. They are formally forbidden to write anything."* Another journalist, living in exile in France, took a similar view of those working for the country's only radio station, *Radio Sharia*: They put out 12 hours of programmes per day with no journalistic content whatever, and no songs. Sermons alternate with religious debates and propaganda in which they insult Massud and the Americans."

by the department, register all their professional equipment with the relevant ministry and renew their work permits every year. Finally, bureau chiefs representing international media are obliged to attend government press conferences and to check that only the name "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" appears in their reports. No penalties for the infringement of these regulations are specified in the documents issued by the authorities.

Journalists in exile threatened

After the Taliban took Kabul and Jalalabad, most journalists fled either to parts of the country under opposition control or to Pakistan, Iran or Tajikistan. **Latif Pedram** went into hiding when the Taliban arrived for fear of being "*beheaded*". "*Exile has become the only way to survive when you're an Afghan journalist*", he said. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has helped about ten journalists to go to western countries from Peshawar. Dozens more have reached a host country under their own steam. Afghans fleeing the Taliban have met up with others who left the country to escape the communists or the Mujahideen. Some have launched new media, while others are working for the five international radio stations that broadcast programmes in Farsi. Their broadcasts, and particularly those of the *BBC*, are extremely popular in Afghanistan. Latif Pedram said: "*The international stations are the only mass media Afghanistan has ever known. They are both a lifeline and a window opening up to the rest of the world.*"

These journalists are not out of danger just because they have left the country. Two Afghan reporters have narrowly escaped murder attempts in Pakistan since 1996. At least five others have been attacked or received death threats. Investigations by the Pakistani police, which are often slapdish, have provided no clues to the identity of the attackers.

A "talibanisation" of Pakistan?

"*We shall not hesitate to use all the means at our disposal to force the government to close down cable television channels in this country*", warned Ehsan-ul-Haq, one of the leaders of the Islami Muttahida Inqilabi Mahaz movement, which groups 21 fundamentalist Moslem organisations in Pakistan. In June 2000 the religious movements of this country launched a campaign against cable television operators, which were authorised by the federal government at the start of the year. To stir up their supporters against "*vulgar and obscene*" TV programmes, the religious leaders issued a fatwa calling on all Moslems to "*rise up against the Devil*" represented by cable operators.

The Pakistani religious movements have the power to impose some of their points of view to the local authorities, alternating political pressure, threats, demonstrations and acts of sabotage. The existence of a varied press, a basic element in Pakistan's liberal Islam, has never been publicly questioned by the religious leaders. But there are fears that their pleas for stricter enforcement of Sharia law may result in censorship.